

CHAPTER 6

RETRIEVING SAINT FRANCIS: Tradition and Innovation for Our Ecological Vocation

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KEY TERMS

discipleship

religious ecological

consciousness

patron saint

religious retrieval

environmentalist

ecologist

tradition

vocation

The Canticle of the Creatures, by Saint Francis of Assisi (1182–1226)

Most High, all-powerful, good Lord
Yours are the praises, the glory, and the honor and the blessing.
To You alone, Most High, do they belong,
And no human is worthy to mention Your name.
Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures,
Especially Sir Brother Sun,
Who is the day and through whom You give us light.
And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor;
And bears a likeness of You, Most High One.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
In heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful.
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,
And through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather,

Through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures.
 Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Water,
 Who is very useful and humble and precious and chaste.
 Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Fire,
 Through whom You light the night,
 And he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.
 Praised be You my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,
 Who sustains and governs us,
 And who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs.
 Praised be You, my Lord, through those who give pardon for
 Your love,
 And bear infirmity and tribulation.
 Blessed are those who endure in peace
 For by You, Most High, shall they be crowned.
 Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Bodily Death,
 from whom no one living can escape.
 Woe to those who die in mortal sin.
 Blessed are those whom death will find in Your most holy will,
 for the second death shall do them no harm.
 Praised be You my Lord and give him thanks
 And serve him with great humility.¹

INTRODUCTION

Saint Francis of Assisi is widely acclaimed as the preeminent example of Christian care for creation. British Royalty, scientists, leaders of other faiths, diverse scholars, and ordinary believers have claimed him as their inspiration in this age of ecological crisis. Why does he have such a broad appeal? First, Francis recognized God's work in creation and loved it. *The Canticle of the Creatures* celebrates his passionate and sensory love of creation. He celebrated the beauty of God in creation and loved God all the more for this gift. Second, Francis experienced God in creation, and this is a most helpful

1. All texts of the writings by and about Saint Francis are taken from Regis Armstrong OFM Capuchin, Wayne Hellman, OFM Conventual, and William Short OFM, eds., *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, Volume I: The Saint* (New York: New City Press, 1999). Subsequently referred to as FA: ED. *The Canticle* is on pages 113–114.

starting point for contemporary Christian theology. Many Christians have overemphasized the “stain of original sin” but have forgotten the more fundamental reality of creation as the good gift of God. Third, Francis provides an example of reflective action. His encounter with the pain of the world inspired him to pray with passion but also to act with compassion and proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Francis’ radical Christian discipleship—his dedication to living the Gospel of Jesus Christ—and passionate love of creation represent an important example of religious ecological consciousness, which means an awareness of humans’ inescapable ecological interdependent relationship with Earth, its elements and living organisms.² Francis’ ecological consciousness influenced his religious imagination, his vision for moral living, his prayer, and his preaching. His life gives witness to an ecological wisdom, to how human beings can live a good life in relationship to the Earth. His witness can inspire in us a vocational response, devoting one’s whole life to God’s love and the needs of the world. Francis is among the most beloved Catholic saints, and his example speaks to men and women of all traditions, and to those who do not profess any religious faith. By exploring his ecological witness, we can learn how faith traditions more generally can participate in broader efforts to create a more sustainable society.

Yet, Francis lived in the Middle Ages on the Italian Peninsula without any notion of science or what modern people would call environmental problems. How can he be a patron saint of ecologists, given that he died more than six centuries before the invention of ecological science? Similarly, many who today tout him as a religious environmental hero ignore the problem of selectively plucking his admirable features out of his historical context. White, for instance, describes Francis as “clearly heretical,” ignoring the inconvenient truth that Pope Gregory IX canonized Francis a saint, in 1228, two years after his death, in the Catholic Church. Many find Francis inspiring, but few acknowledge the tricky issues of selectively retrieving the features moderns like from a medieval saint’s biography.

These problems are aggravated by the complex and often contradictory character of the writings by and about Francis. He was a medieval man in a society quite different from modern day, and

2. See Christopher Uhl, *Developing Ecological Consciousness: Paths to a Sustainable World* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI



IMAGE © THE GALLERY COLLECTION/CORBIS

"St. Francis of Assisi Preaching to the Birds," a predella painting from "The Stigmatization of St. Francis," ca. 1295–1300. Francis is widely loved and respected for his radical Christian discipleship and passionate love of creation, which many today regard as a model for religious ecological consciousness.

Francis' care for creation is but one expression of his vocation, which was rooted in his passionate love of Jesus Christ. Francis was foremost a follower of Jesus, but in him, there was no tension between loving God and loving all creatures of God. His life was marked by a succession of intense religious experiences—what might be called conversion events—that drew him deeper into the mystery of God. Francis was the most popular saint of the Middle Ages because of the dramatic and public expressions

of his conversion events and because he made the message of God's love accessible to ordinary people. His life inspires faith in Jesus Christ and care for creation. In 1967, Lynn White Jr. proposed Francis as "the patron saint of ecologists"³ and twelve years later, Pope John Paul II enacted this suggestion.

one cannot slavishly mimic him. To do so would require pretending modern people were also medieval. Looking to Francis for inspiration requires attention to the fundamental differences between his world and today's. Present-day people have to interpret his example, to translate the significance of his witness in his times into terms that

3. Lynn White, Jr. "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1203–1207.

PATRON SAINTS

What is a patron saint, and why does the Catholic Church have them? The lives of patron saints are presented as examples of Christian faith and virtue. Through the centuries, the Church has informally and formally recognized distinguished Christians, and held them up as examples for the inspiration of all. They are selected years or centuries after their death to speak to the spiritual aspirations of a contemporary society. Pope John Paul II took Lynn White Jr.'s initial, almost casual suggestion, but named Francis an example for a wide range of people working on a broader agenda of social transformation, a much bigger vision than the science of ecology alone offers.

are meaningful in the context of contemporary culture. This requires deciding upon appropriate expressions of his wisdom, insight, and consciousness to guide life choices today. To do so entails exercising wisdom in interpreting Francis.

To make Francis' witness meaningful in contemporary culture, one must undertake a retrieval process. Religious retrieval is a broad set of activities taking place across all faiths to select the most appropriate beliefs, human values, and ritual practices to re-present their religious identity to the modern world. The selective retrieval of traditions is a fundamental task in the "Greening of Religions," because this is the chief feature that distinguishes religious environmentalism from other expressions of environmental concern.⁴

This chapter addresses the problem of interpreting the witness of Francis by explaining how and why he and his ecological wisdom have been retrieved. It will draw from the broader reappropriation of Franciscan spirituality, and illustrate general issues in the retrieval and reinterpretation of tradition in the Greening of Religions. This chapter begins by describing how Pope John Paul II re-presented Francis as a model of environmental care. It examines the key features

4. See Roger S. Gottlieb, *A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism and Our Planet's Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

of Francis' ecological wisdom and then pivots perspective to examine how Franciscans are reinterpreting this wisdom today as part of a broader retrieval process. It concludes by proposing that tradition and innovation are both necessary in the greening of discipleship.

THE PATRON SAINT OF ECOLOGISTS

In 1979, Pope John Paul II named Saint Francis of Assisi “heavenly patron of those who promote ecology,” referring to Francis’ “Cantic of the Creatures.”⁵ Ten years later, the pope launched Catholic concern for the environment with his World Day of Peace Message, *The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility*.⁶ So great was the impact of *The Ecological Crisis* that it ended the debate about *whether* Catholics should be concerned about the environment, and the discussion shifted to *how* Catholics should express their care for creation.⁷ John Paul II articulated new ethical duties for Catholics, indeed for the whole human family. He diagnosed the environmental crisis as rooted in a moral crisis for humanity: sin, selfishness, and a lack of respect for life. He proposed several remedies, religious and ethical. He said humanity should explore, examine, and “safeguard” the integrity of creation. He described duties of individuals and institutions of all kinds: for the nations of the world to cooperate at an international level in the management of Earth’s goods, for individual nations to care for their citizens, and for individuals to undertake an education in ecological responsibility, for oneself, for others, and for Earth. In the final section of *The Ecological Crisis*, Pope John Paul II addressed “my brothers and sisters in the Catholic Church, in order to remind them of their serious obligation to care for all creation.” He expressed “hope that the inspiration of Saint Francis

5. Pope John Paul II, “S. Franciscus Assisiensis caelestis Patronus oecologicae cultorum eligitur,” *Acta Apostolica Sedis* 71 (1979): 1509–1510.

6. Pope John Paul II, “The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility,” World Day of Peace Message 1990, in *And God Saw That It Was Good: Catholic Theology and the Environment*, eds. Drew Christiansen, SJ, and W. Grazer (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1996).

7. Keith Douglass Warner, OFM, “The Greening of American Catholicism: Identity, Conversion and Continuity,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 18, no. 1 (2008): 113–142.

will help us to keep ever alive a sense of ‘fraternity’ with all those good and beautiful things which Almighty God has created.”

The difference in language between White’s proposal and the official English translation of John Paul II’s announcement is subtle but important; it merits close analysis because it indicates how concern for Catholic identity shapes this retrieval process. White proposed Francis as the patron saint of ecologists, but the original Latin in the 1979 Vatican document named Francis patron of *oecologicae cultorum*, officially translated as “those who cultivate or promote ecology.” What did the pope have in mind with this term? In the United States, one distinguishes *environmentalist* (a public advocate for environmental protection) from *ecologist* (a scientist who practices a subfield of biology). In Italian and the Romance languages, however, many people use the terms *ecology* and *environmental concern* interchangeably. In Europe, those who “promote ecology” are environmental advocates and not necessarily ecological scientists. Thus, in the North American context, the meaning of the original Latin could readily be translated as *environmentalists*, *environmental educators*, or *environmental advocates*. Latin, the language of official Catholic documents, has no word for *environmentalist*, so the pope had to select a different term. Yet, modern American terms were not chosen for the official English translation, perhaps because most Catholic leaders—even those highly concerned about the environment—have warily avoided these labels and their associated controversies.

Still, it is important to note that Pope John Paul II was quite open to conducting dialogue with the sciences. He repeated the term *ecology* and its derivatives throughout his pontificate, expressing concern about the direction of human society and reminding his audiences of their moral duties. Taken as a whole, his environmental teachings support stewardship but reframe the rationale and approach within a broad Catholic worldview shaped by Catholic social teaching principles.⁸ In the last years of his life, he emphasized human duties to future generations.

8. Marjorie Keenan, RSHM, *From Stockholm to Johannesburg: An Historical Overview of the Concern of the Holy See for the Environment 1972–2002* (Vatican City: Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2002).

It is necessary, therefore, to stimulate and sustain the “ecological conversion,” which over these last decades has made humanity more sensitive when facing the catastrophe toward which it was moving. . . . Therefore, not only is a “physical” ecology at stake, attentive to safeguarding the habitat of different living beings, but also a “human” ecology that will render the life of creatures more dignified, protecting the radical good of life in all its manifestations and preparing an environment for future generations that is closer to the plan of the Creator.⁹

The pope affirmed that the biological and physical world of creation is important but that human flourishing is important as well. He also said humankind’s “ecological vocation” is more urgent than ever, given the grave threats to the environment.¹⁰ These examples illustrate how John Paul II advocated a profound, critical analysis of the root causes of the environmental crisis. Most conventional environmentalists address the problems of heedless industrial growth and flawed public policy. Pope John Paul II challenged everyone to recognize that the ecological crises are rooted in a much more profound problem, a disordered understanding of what it means to be human in relationship to God and to fellow humans. His critique went further than conventional U.S. environmentalism and called for deeper reflection on making better choices, wiser choices that can uphold Gospel values. His concerns reflect his continued insistence on a strong and clear Catholic identity and his vision of bringing this tradition to bear on the problems of modernity. Throughout his pontificate, John Paul II affirmed the importance of solidarity and awareness of our inescapable interdependence. In light of the breadth of his environmental teaching, *oecologicae cultorum* can reasonably be translated as *ecological consciousness*, and Francis is the patron saint of those who promote it.

9. Pope John Paul II, General Audience Address, January 17, 2001; available at http://conservation.catholic.org/john_paul_ii.htm, accessed December 18, 2008.

10. Pope John Paul II, “God Made Man the Steward of Creation,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, January 24, 2001, 11.

CHRIST, FRANCIS, AND CREATION

Francis' relationship with creation should be understood within the broader context of his religious journey: its essential themes of passionate love for Jesus Christ, the desire to follow him, contemplative prayer, ongoing conversion of life, and a spirituality of brotherhood with everyone and everything. Francis' historical record has an astonishing diversity of material. Until recently, most of the popular books about of his life have been based on medieval legends written decades or centuries after his life, by people who did not personally know him. These include many later additions of questionable historical accuracy. Since the Second Vatican Council, scholars have emphasized Francis' own writings because they convey his voice. This new scholarship emphasizes his dedication to following Jesus Christ, his love of the Gospels and the Eucharist, his practice of contemplative prayer, and his public proclamation of God's love and peace. Some surprising insights have emerged. For example, Francis was not a priest; he split his time between wilderness hermitages and urban preaching; and he had no intention of starting a religious order. He set out to foster lay vocations among all people.

Some of the new scholarship has addressed his relationship with Earth, highlighting his love of animals and the elements.¹¹ The medieval stories about Francis describe spiritual encounters with rabbits, fish, worms, bees, crickets, and lambs. The most famous story is that of him preaching to the birds, but contemporary popularization in the form of Francis as a garden statue completely fails to recognize the radical significance of this encounter.¹² His first biographer explains,

After the birds had listened so reverently to the word of God, he began to accuse himself of negligence because he had not preached to them before. From that day on, he

11. Dawn M. Nothwehr, OSF, *Franciscan Theology of the Environment: An Introductory Reader* (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 2003); Roger D. Sorrell, *St. Francis of Assisi and Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

12. Keith Douglass Warner, OFM, "Get Him Out of the Birdbath!" in *Franciscan Theology of the Environment*, ed. Dawn M. Nothwehr (Quincy, IL: Franciscan Press, 2002), 361–376.

carefully exhorted all birds, all animals, all reptiles, and also insensible creatures, to love the Creator, because daily, invoking the name of the Savior, he observed their obedience in his own experience.¹³

The true significance of this story is that Francis awoke to the communion of life he shared with the birds, not that he preached to them. This encounter prompted Francis to further integrate his love of creation with his religious identity and responsibilities. Just as his storied encounter with a leper furthered his religious conversion, so did that with the birds. In ethical terms, nonhuman creatures facilitated an expansion of Francis' moral imagination, because they indicated to him the next set of tasks in his religious journey.

The "Canticle of the Creatures" best conveys Francis' voice about his experience of creation. Francis reveled in the sun, gazed upon the stars, danced with the air, was drawn to the fire, marveled at water, and caressed the earth. The "Canticle's" vivid images emerged from Francis' sustained contact with the elements and his prayer with the Psalms and Gospels. The "Canticle" echoes Psalm 148 and Daniel 3:57–88, and suggests a courtly song of praise to the Creator of the cosmos. Francis, like most vowed religious, would have prayed these regularly, and their imagery would have captured and conveyed his own experience. Francis spent up to one half of each year praying with a few brothers in the wilderness.¹⁴ The early friars practiced contemplative prayer: the practice of responding to love by opening one's heart and by deepening one's awareness of God's love. Contemplation is not liturgical or intercessory prayer. It is not public prayer and does not ask for anything, but rather deepens one's understanding of the depth and breadth and all-encompassing character of God's love.¹⁵

13. Thomas of Celano, "The Life of Saint Francis" in FA:ED, page 234 ff. Technically this is a hagiography, not a biography.

14. W. J. Short, OFM, "Recovering Lost Traditions in Spirituality: Franciscans, Camaldolese and the Hermitage," *Spiritus* 3 (2003): 209–218.

15. I. Delio, OSF, K. D. Warner, OFM, and P. Wood, *Care for Creation: A Contemporary Franciscan Spirituality of the Earth* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2008).

The “Canticle” is a fruit of sustained contemplative spiritual practice, celebrating God’s love for all creation and reflected back by creation’s praise. It cannot be properly understood apart from Francis’ love for Jesus Christ, as expressed through his devotion to the Incarnation and Passion, as experienced through his senses when praying in the wilderness. The “Canticle” discloses Francis’ recognition of creation as an expression of God’s generous love, and that creation has inherent value because God creates it, not because of its material or instrumental value to humans.¹⁶ This is true ecological wisdom.

The renewal of scholarship about Francis began with careful attention to the specifics of his writings and the careful reading of stories about him. The focus of Franciscan scholarship is now shifting to investigate how his religious intuition has shaped the Franciscan tradition: in prayer, preaching, thinking, and acting for the past eight centuries. This work by scholars—women and men, lay and vowed religious—is done to understand the breadth of the Franciscan tradition in history and to open fresh perspectives on how to live out the Franciscan vocation today.¹⁷ Most Franciscans are women, and thus, a great deal of scholarly effort has been devoted to understanding Francis’ counterpart Saint Clare, and more recently, Franciscan laywomen. Clare is a powerful witness to contemplative living.¹⁸ The rediscovery of many diverse expressions of Franciscan spirituality lived out by laywomen points to the recurrent themes in feminine Franciscan spirituality.¹⁹ In parallel, scholars are now articulating Francis’ intuitive spirituality with the philosophical, theological, and cosmological vision of his followers. Saint Bonaventure and Blessed John Duns Scotus are the two most prominent figures in this phase

16. Keith Douglass Warner, OFM, “The Moral Significance of Creation in the Franciscan Theological Tradition: Implications for Contemporary Catholics and Public Policy,” *University of Saint Thomas Law Journal* 5, no. 1 (2008): 37–52.

17. J. Chinnici, OFM, “Institutional Amnesia and the Challenge of Mobilizing our Resources for Franciscan Theology,” in *The Franciscan Intellectual Tradition*, ed. E. Saggau, OSF, (Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2002), 105–150.

18. Regis Armstrong, OFM, Capuchin, *Clare of Assisi—The Lady: Early Documents* (NY: New City Press, 2006); Ilia Delio, OSF, *Clare of Assisi: A Heart Full of Love* (Cincinnati, OH: Saint Anthony Messenger Press, 2007).

19. Darlene Pryds, *Women of the Streets: Early Franciscan Women and their Mendicant Vocation* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute and the Secretariat for the Franciscan Intellectual Tradition, 2009).

of retrieval. Bonaventure proposed numerous theological metaphors for understanding creation, and these open fresh avenues for dialogue between science and religion. Scotus articulated a profound and provocative relationship between the Incarnation and creation that provides an alternative approach to Catholic environmental ethics. The Franciscan movement today is actively retrieving the wisdom of these historical figures to inspire and guide humanity into the future.

TRADITION AND INNOVATION FOR ECOLOGICAL VOCATION

This entire book implicitly bears two important questions facing all religious groups seeking to articulate an environmental ethos: which elements (scriptures, rituals, saints, prayer styles, understandings of God) from a tradition can be used to foster a greener discipleship? How should these be integrated with contemporary environmental concerns? It is important to recall that all the environmental teachings in all the world's religions took shape before humans had the capacity to cause the contemporary environmental problems, in other words, before modern environmental ethics were needed. All religions have some ethical resources in their traditions, but they also carry problematic teachings from an environmental perspective, such as the belief in human total superiority to other creatures or the need to reject the world as somehow inferior to communion with the divine.

Reclaiming the importance of tradition is a key feature distinguishing religious from other forms of environmentalism. The word *tradition* comes from the Latin *tradere*, meaning, "to transmit or deliver." This indicates that traditions are not static treasures to be defended but rather living memories and values and ways of being that are shared from one generation to the next. Transmitting tradition becomes more challenging when confronting new problems. Reclaiming tradition for religious environmental ethics requires multiple steps.

- Of all the elements in a religious tradition spanning millennia, which should be selected for *retrieval*? This requires discretion, for some elements of a tradition should be left in the past, and others could be helpful for inspiring action today.

- In light of the current ecological crises, how should humans *reinterpret* these elements, in other words, explain their meaning in an age of ecological crisis? Francis loved creation, but he was not an environmentalist. Pope John Paul II reinterpreted Francis' life as a medieval person to be a model to help us foster greater ecological consciousness today.
- How can these processes *renew* religious identity more generally? This requires thinking critically about what values humans want to animate them today, and identifying examples from the past to help in their journey into the future. However, it also requires engagement with new ideas, such as science. Ecological knowledge is an essential component of any environmental ethic today. Thus, renewal is necessarily innovative, because it entails synthesizing the past with present knowledge to create new solutions to problems.

Weaving together the responses to these questions takes the form of a vocation, for they direct attention to the needs of the world. These problems will not be addressed only by individuals or by individual actions but rather by a collective revisioning of humanity. Francis witnesses to what the Catholic and Christian tradition can contribute to this vision of humanity in relationship with nature, but every religious tradition is actively undertaking retrieval efforts to address modern environmental crises. The authentic answer to these questions consists not merely in data, nor only in good intentions but rather the practice of living one's spiritual life with ecological consciousness.

CONCLUSION

Pope John Paul II urged humanity to fulfill its "ecological vocation," to care for Earth. He fused this classic term from Catholic spirituality with something "new"—*ecology*. This new term draws attention to the wisdom resources from Catholic history but integrates that with contemporary conceptual scientific tools for understanding the ecological consequences of humans' foolish and irresponsible treatment of Earth. Thus, the term *ecological vocation* captures and conveys the wisdom of Catholicism in just two words, fusing tradition and innovation.

THE SAINT FRANCIS PLEDGE

The Catholic Coalition for Climate Change has a Web site with more information for Catholic individuals, families, and parishes about care for the environment. It includes a Saint Francis Pledge that people can make as a way of covenanting their vocation as caretakers of Earth: <http://catholicclimate-covenant.org/the-st-francis-pledge/>.

The example of Francis can inspire people to respond to the cry of Earth with love, compassion, and generosity. People cannot simply mimic him but can look to his example as they formulate their own vocational responses to a world of environmental crises. A contemporary vocational response can draw from Francis' example of ecological consciousness but will have to synthesize something new by combining inspiration, a contemporary moral vision, and the best scientific information. This is how people can best transmit their tradition in an age of ecological crisis.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. What is meant by *ecological consciousness*, and how does Saint Francis exemplify it?
2. What is meant by *vocation*, and what does Pope John Paul II say about humanity's ecological vocation?
3. What is meant by *oecologicae cultorum*?
4. Why does the Catholic Church have patron saints? What is their significance?
5. What is the true ecological wisdom that is derived from Saint Francis' "The Canticle of the Creatures" and his recognition of creation as an expression of God's love?

IN-DEPTH QUESTIONS

1. Identify ways in which Saint Francis' "The Canticle of the Creatures" emphasizes humankind's kinship with creation. How might this view of our relationship with creation affect how we live and how we treat nature?
2. Why is the contemporary popularization of Saint Francis as a garden statue or a birdbath problematic? How might placing such a statue in one's garden instead be a positive practice? What kinds of spiritual practices might contemporary Catholics, as well as those of other religious traditions, undertake to respond to the environmental witness of Francis?
3. What are two teachings in the Christian tradition that are problematic from an environmental perspective? Why? What are some other possibly problematic teachings in the history of Christianity from an environmental perspective?
4. What was your understanding of the word *tradition* before this reading? Why is it important to remember that tradition is not static? How can tradition develop and innovatively address new questions, such as regarding the environment, while remaining faithful to its past and its origins?
5. What does it mean to be inspired by a saint's example without necessarily imitating him or her?